DEUS EX™

HARD LINE

James Swallow

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TITAN BOOKS

In the end, it took four of them to bring her down. The cops came in with stun batons and armored gauntlets, surrounding her like a wall of black shadow.

She called out for help – it was happening in the middle of the day, for crying out loud, on the street, in front of everyone – but not one person intervened, or even questioned what was happening. They saw the line of the implant scar across her forehead and they immediately looked away.

In the eyes of those passersby, Alex Vega was an Aug, and everyone knew that augmented people were dangerous. Every one of them, a ticking time bomb.

She blacked out briefly. When the fog cleared, Vega was inside a van and her head was still ringing like a bell. She lurched from side to side as they rolled through Prague's backstreets.

The menacing figure sitting across from her was virtually identical to the other three, all of them concealed behind the same hard planes of Monolith patrol armor, their faceless helmets like the blunt end of a giant chisel. They could have been machines for all she knew.

Vega realized something was very wrong when her GPS implant told her they had driven right past the nearest precinct and kept on going, into the open swath of the downtown reconstruction zone. Through slit-windows in the side of the van, she glimpsed the sprawl of building projects where the Santeau Group's workers toiled night and day to remake the city in a new form. When they passed into an uncleared sector where derelict frontages lined the street, Vega knew they were probably going to kill her.

She tried to fight back, but they had those stunners. Vega triggered her infolink augmentation, but the signal was choppy. The taser hits must have knocked it out of whack. She couldn’t be sure.

Things went black again, and then she was in a dark jail cell that reeked of burned wood.

She took stock of herself. Like Belltower had taught her in basic training, check your body from top to toe, know where you are hurt. Vega winced when she found contusions, and the fresh bloom of new bruises that were already turning patches of her olive skin an ugly yellow. Her augmentations showed error messages in display projected into the corner of her eye, and both the GPS and infolink were giving her nothing but strings of garbled text.

Vega felt a tightness around her wrist and looked down to see a steel cuff locked around it, glowing blue indicator lights blinking softly on the device. They weren’t taking any chances. The inhibitor unit used low-level electromagnetic fields to scramble the use of any offensive cybernetics she might have.

She cursed. Most of Vega’s implants were small-scale passive tech, mostly nerve-jacks and communications hardware, but the one augmentation she did have that would have proven useful – a Glasshield silhouette cloak, capable of short-term thermoptical camouflage – was now dead weight. With it, she could have made herself a ghost and eventually found a way out of here by stealth. Without it, she was reduced to relying on her other skills.

Vega crossed the cell to the bars and tested them, more out of habit than hope. The locks were old-school, heavy industrial metal with remote deadbolts controlled from somewhere else in the building. Above, dull light oozed from chemical lights in the ceiling.

She became aware that she wasn’t alone. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, Vega picked out other figures in the

cells along the corridor. Somewhere, a man was muttering and weeping.

Feet scraped on the concrete floor, and in the cell directly across from her, a shape moved until she could clearly see two steel hands clasping the bars. She saw a sallow, late-twenties face and dark hair beneath a raised hood.

“Where the hell are we?” she asked him.

The main door to the holding area hissed open on a piston, and the hooded man shrank back into the darkness without replying.

Two of the cops entered, still in their armor. She noticed for the first time that they had disabled their ident tabs so there was nothing to show what precinct or division of the Prague police they were part of. Like the automatic body-cams on their chest-plates, those things were supposed to be tamper-proof, but Vega knew full well that anything digital could be corrupted given the right knowledge.

One of them banged on the bars and swore at her in gutter Czech. “Let me take a wild guess,” said Vega, showing a defiant sneer. “I bet you’re the one I kicked in the balls, right?”

“Do not be clever, clank.” The other cop spoke for the first time. Her voice was all sharp points and snarling. “You resisted arrest. You are lucky we did not put you down on the street like you deserve.” The raw venom in the woman’s words came from some place deep and personal, and it gave Vega pause. The cop wasn’t looking at her and seeing a human being – it was likely she was laying Alex Vega’s face over the top of whatever particular horror she had experienced during the Aug Incident, putting all that hate and sorrow on to a stranger just because she had cybernetic enhancements. It wasn’t the first time Vega had been on the wrong end of such a reaction.

“Didn’t give me much choice,” Vega said neutrally, trying to map the situation. She had been rousted by cops in Prague for no good reason on several occasions since she

arrived there. The city had been hit hard during the Incident and that kind of shock took a long time to fade away. But it had never been as bad as this. “Am I under arrest? You gonna read me my rights?”

“Mechs have no rights,” said the male cop. “You look like ARC to me.”

“I’m not part of the Augmented Rights Coalition,” Vega told him. “I’m not an activist or anything like that—”

“You mean terrorist,” snapped the woman. “Who do you work for? Alejandra Vega. American. What are you doing in our city?” She had Vega’s citizen identity and augmentation license displayed on a data panel inset on her gauntlet.

“I’m a cargo pilot,” Vega explained, drawing on her cover story. “I work for Lebedev Global out at the airport.” That was the truth – partly.

“They trust you mechs to fly planes?” The male cop snorted in derision. “What if you…?” He made a spastic, jerking motion with his arms. “You crash it!”

“Not gonna happen,” said Vega, her lips thinning. She decided to stall for time and try a different tack. “Look, I’m sorry about what I did before, I overreacted. Call my boss, I’m sure we can smooth this over…” She paused. “Maybe there’s an on-the-spot fine I could pay?”

“Did you just offer us a bribe?” The female cop leaned in, the helmet’s blank mask reflecting back a warped mirror of Vega’s face. She looked her up and down. “You do not have enough. No-one is going to miss you.” She snapped her fingers and the other police officer followed her back out, the door sealing behind them.

“They don’t want money,” said a low voice. Vega looked up and saw the man in the cell across the corridor. Now he was in the light, she could see he had full limb replacements on his arms and legs, and silver teardrops below one eye suggesting neural implants as well. One of the legs sported the same kind of inhibitor Vega was wearing. He worked his fingers in front of his face. “They want these.”

With the cops gone for the moment, Vega returned to the business of checking every inch of the cell for flaws. “What is this place?” she asked aloud.

“Police station,” said the man “At least, it used to be. Abandoned after the Událost.” He used the Czech word for the Incident. “That night it was burned out. This was where the Aug cops were based. They killed everyone, then each other…”

“Right.” Vega tested the bars again, but to no avail. Her own memories of the Aug Incident were clouded and hard to hold in her thoughts. Millions of augmented people, seventy percent of us driven temporarily insane by a fight-or-flight reflex… What must it have been like in here when it happened?

It would have been bad enough to face a maddened Aug with only basic cyberware, but an enhanced police officer, one of the city’s E-SWAT operatives? Vega’s blood ran cold at the thought of it, and she wondered if the hateful woman who threw her in here had lost someone important during all of that.

In the aftermath, the world had changed. A bright future that was almost reachable was suddenly snatched away and turned to cinders. Humanity rounded on the augmented and closed ranks against Vega and people like her. We will never be trusted again, she thought. We’ll always be feared and hated.

But what most of the people living on the lines of society’s fractures did not know was a truth that Vega had learned the hard way, a truth that had forever changed her. The grotesque reality was that the Incident had been manufactured. It was the fruit of plans that even now were still ongoing, part of a greater design by a cabal of shadowy power brokers who declared themselves superior to everyone else – and acted accordingly.

And if that sounds like a deep black conspiracy theory, that’s because it is, Vega reflected. The thought of it

triggered something inside her, a slow-burning anger that never seemed to fade. Her hands unconsciously tightened into fists.

What was happening to her now, the hate that she and others like her were exposed to, all of that was the toxic fallout from the schemes of men and women who thought themselves so far elevated over the common flock that they could treat them like pieces on a chessboard.

“Is anyone going to come looking for you?” said the man, a faint note of hope forcing its way up through the resignation in his voice. When she didn’t answer, he looked down, his eyes glittering in the dimness. “I thought not. We’re all going to die here.”

* * *

The wind changed direction and brought with it the distant sound of sirens.

Vega knew if she looked down from the rooftop of the crumbling office tower where they stood, she would be able to spot the plumes of smoke from the melee they had left behind on the streets of New York City.

“They’re going to come after me,” said Vega grimly, and she hugged herself as the cold wind off the Hudson River cut through the sleeves of her flight suit. “They’ll hunt me down and kill me for what I’ve done.”

Saxon gave her a sideways look. “Belltower?” He nodded toward her coveralls, which still bore the bull’s head logo of the private military contractor. Two days ago, she had been on their payroll; now she was AWOL, a wanted fugitive in full breach of her contract. “Yeah, you’re right. They don’t let go easily.” The muscular Englishman looked away, scanning the horizon as if he was expecting enemies to appear at any moment.

The sweat from the exertion of their escape had chilled on Vega’s skin, and more than anything she wanted to get back

to the cockpit of her VTOL and seal herself in. She felt safe in there, protected. At the controls of her flyer, Vega was master of her own world, but out here she felt infinitely vulnerable.

All she wanted was to get free and clear, after everything that happened, but with each passing moment that seemed more and more like a foolish dream. Back in Panama City, where she and Ben Saxon had first crossed paths, Vega had been nothing more than a taxi pilot in a Belltower uniform. It seemed like a makeweight assignment, ferrying around a special investigator from the World Health Organization who was down there looking into the illegal trade in anti-augmentation rejection drugs; but then it all went to hell. Her passenger was assassinated, and Belltower's part in a plot to conceal a death toll of thousands was revealed to her. She stumbled into a conspiracy that considered her little more than collateral damage – a loose end to be terminated.

Desperate to escape, Vega became caught up in Saxon's crusade against the conspirators, a path that took them to Australia and then back to the USA, to New York and the chaos that was now unfolding. She'd been ready for none of it, and the stable life she'd carved out for herself was falling to pieces. Saxon traded her skills for his offer of a way out, but now it was done, now she was free, everything seemed to be closing down to a zero sum game.

"Way I see it?" said Saxon, intuiting her thoughts. "You got yourself two options. You go to ground… or you stand and fight." He cocked his head, unconsciously flexing his cybernetic arm. "I tried the first one. Me and Anna, both of us going off the grid, hoping to survive the storm that's coming…" Like Vega, Saxon had turned his back on Belltower after learning of their part in the conspiracy, and his friend Anna Kelso had fallen victim to the same thing after discovering a mole inside the US Secret Service.

"How'd that work out for you?" she asked.

“Not so good,” he opened his hands. “Anna nearly died. I would have too, if you hadn’t been around to pull me out.”

“De nada,” Vega replied. “We ex-Belltower ops gotta stick together.” She managed a brittle grin, but it was false humor.

“I don’t think Alex Vega is the run and hide type,” said Saxon. “Am I right?”

The grin became a scowl. “It’s not like those sons-of-bitches gave me a choice! They set me up to take the fall for the death of that investigator, so I can’t go to the authorities…” A surge of impotent anger unfolded in her chest. “They made it so I can’t be anything but a victim of this!”

“Not true,” Saxon corrected. “You got skills, Alex. And I know someone who could make good use of them. You want to take back control of your life? Janus can help you do that.”

“Janus?” The name seemed strange when she said it out loud. “I heard you mention this guy before.” All she knew was that Janus was some kind of top-tier hacker-activist with an axe to grind. “He’s a friend of yours?”

Saxon gave a thin smile. “It’s complicated,” he said. “I’ll introduce you. You’ll see for yourself.”

* * *

The memory faded back into the past and Vega drew herself back to the moment. She glanced out past the bars of her cell and across the corridor to where the other prisoners were being confined. The fear she had felt that day in New York ghosted through her, and she fought it down, smothering any flicker of panic before it could coalesce.

“Tell me your name,” she asked the man in the hoodie. “Tell me how you got here.”

He was wary at first, but slowly he began to open up. He told her his name was Ivan, and as night began to fall and

the stale, close air of the old police station closed in around them, Vega let him find his way toward the details.

The cops had grabbed him two nights earlier near Kampa Park. Ivan wouldn't talk about why he was there after dark, but without special dispensation documents he was a walking invitation for trouble.

Ivan showed Vega bruises that made hers look like nothing in comparison. He'd tried to run from them, tried to fight them off, but in the end the cops had all come in and taken their shots at him.

"I thought they would break my neck and throw me off a bridge," he told her. "Instead they brought me here."

Vega understood that part of life for an Aug in 2029 Prague was dealing with prejudice and suspicion from the police force, but the beating Ivan had taken was beyond any of that.

She looked down the corridor toward the other cells. "Have you talked to anyone else?"

He nodded grimly. "There was a man in your cell. He used to be a doctor, or something." Ivan indicated his head. "A lot of implants up here. This morning they took him away and I heard him screaming. Then nothing." He mimed the line of a knife slitting his throat.

"You said they want our augmentations?" She spoke quietly, keeping her voice low. "That's what they're doing, like Harvesters?" There wasn't an Aug alive who hadn't heard of the grisly crimes of the gangs who kidnapped augmented people to strip them for parts.

"Mechs like us go missing and no-one seems to care," said Ivan. "Aug tech can't be bought legally by anyone any more, not since the regulations came in." He held up his machine arms. "On the black market these are worth five times what I paid for them."

Vega felt a sickly flutter in her stomach. Her cyberware was buried in her motor cortex, her nerves and spinal column. Ivan might survive having his arms and legs forcibly

disconnected, but she would have to die for someone to remove her implants. That was the fate that the doctor Ivan mentioned must have suffered.

“I hate them so much,” he said, through gritted teeth. “I do not have… No words to say.” His anger was making it hard for him to express himself. Ivan told her how before the Incident, he had been working to make something of himself as an auto mechanic. One of the best in the city, he said, with a ghost of pride. Someone with a real future.

But like everyone else touched by the horrors of that fateful day, Aug and unaugmented alike, that possibility had been ripped away in blood and chaos. “The Naturals, they do not understand. They think we are all animals, so they treat us like it, stick us in cages and abuse us—”

“And we become animals?” The words slipped out of Vega’s mouth. “No. I can’t believe that. We have to hold on to what makes us human. We have to be better.”

Ivan glared at her and his eyes flashed. “You sound like Rucker!”

“Talos Rucker?” The de facto leader the Augmented Rights Coalition was a lightning rod in Central Europe, living among all the other dispossessed Augs that had been forcibly relocated to the Utulek Complex outside of Prague. They called the ghetto Golem City.

If his speeches were to be believed, Rucker was struggling to find a peaceful way to heal the wounds of the past. But he wasn’t the only voice inside ARC, and there were those who argued for – and perpetrated – acts of violence against whomever oppressed the augmented.

“He’s a good man,” she added.

“He’s an idealist!” Ivan snapped. “He doesn’t understand what needs to be done…”

“What do you think that is?” Vega said gently.

“We need to stop being victims. We need to take back control! There are people in ARC who understand that!” He jabbed a steel finger in the direction of the door. “Those

corrupt cops? They are what happens when we don’t stand up for ourselves. In times like these, you either become the predator or the prey.”

Something in Ivan’s words seemed off, like she was hearing somebody else’s rhetoric layered over the man’s own unfocussed anger. “But bombings and riots aren’t going to make people like them go away,” Vega countered. “It’ll just breed more of them. It’ll prove them right. We’ve got to be better than them. Expose their abuses to the world, so everyone can see it. Then we’ll get justice…” She trailed off, wondering if she too was speaking someone else’s words at that moment.

“Will you say that when they’re cutting you open for your tech?” Ivan gripped the bars of his cell tightly. “They’re getting away with this because no-one cares about a bunch of clanks. We have to fight them. All of us!”

His words caught on the edges of another conversation she’d had, two years earlier, when Alex Vega felt the same kind of fury burning in her.

* * *

From the outside, the TasteMate fast food franchise looked like it was closed, but the door had opened for Vega and she entered warily. Outside, fresh falls of snow were coming down out of Montreal’s slate grey sky and the street was empty of foot traffic. This time of night, in the center of the city, the office district was practically a ghost town.

Looking around the room, her hand strayed to the revolver she carried in her coat pocket, but she didn’t draw it. In the months since her defection from Belltower and the start of her new, freelancer existence, Vega had learned the hard way that she always needed an exit plan.

She surveyed the empty tables and the inert, many-armed robot behind the sandwich-making station. Nothing stirred.

She took a breath. “So,” she began, “am I gonna see you for real this time?”

A holographic panel showing the day’s specials flickered and became a riot of random pixels. Slowly, it coalesced into something that had vaguely human form. A digital shadow with an androgynous ghost-face that suggested no particular race or gender. “Hello, Alex,” said Janus. “I’m sorry to disappoint you. This the best I can do.”

“Huh.” Part of her had been expecting this, but she couldn’t help but feel disappointed. “So I’m having another conversation with a phantom, then?”

“You have my full attention,” promised the avatar. “And my thanks for flying Doctor Cardoso past the Toronto security cordon.”

“Just doing what I can,” she replied. Vega kicked out a chair and sat where she could see the holo-panel and all the exits. “So, I gotta ask you. Is this what the Juggernaut Collective does? Sneaking people across borders or carrying secret packages? I’ve been in a few months now, and I’m starting to wonder.”

“Yes, I know,” said the image. “Right from the start, Benjamin told me you would be more suited to proactive assignments. I apologize if you feel you haven’t been doing anything meaningful, but I want to assure you, you have.” Janus’s unreal mask studied her from a distance. “The Collective is about bringing together people who have suffered at the hands of those who think to rule us. Sometimes, to make that happen requires the mundane business of simple logistics.”

Vega’s jaw set. “Look. I planted my flag with you and your organization because I wanted to fight back. I get what you’re saying, but what I am doing doesn’t feel like that.” She leaned forward, suddenly intense. “I want to make a difference. I want some payback.”

“An understandable reaction,” Janus allowed. “I’ve learned a lot about you, Alex, in recent months.” Part of the holo-

panel misted and became a data screen. A torrent of images and text pages flashed past, too quickly to read – but Vega saw excerpts from her Belltower employment files, her juvenile criminal record, stills of her as little girl, her pilot's log-book, the social media feeds she'd used as a teenager. All that and more besides. Janus had mined her past to find out every detail he could about her. "Please don't be upset about this. I want you to appreciate it was necessary. I had to be certain of who you are, certain of what kind of person I was letting in."

"Right…" She wasn't sure how to feel at that moment.

"Our enemies have tried to infiltrate Juggernaut more than once," Janus went on. "The Illuminati. That alone tells you how much they fear us."

"I keep hearing about these old men running the world, like they're the worst monsters ever. So why aren't we going after them?" Annoyance started to build in her. "You need people you can trust, sure. You got that. So tell me, man. When do we get to take these bastards apart?"

"It's not that simple." The digital image gave a very human shake of the head. "Acts of impulse play into their hands. We have to fight the long war. Pick the battles that make the most impact. We have to follow the hard line."

She got up, the irritable energy rolling around in her forcing Vega to her feet. "And in the meantime, these creeps are twisting the world to how they like it." She glared at the hologram. "I want all the way in, Janus. But I want it to matter."

"It will," insisted the avatar. "Make no mistake. We hold them back at every turn. But it isn't easy. This fight… It ranges across a wilderness of mirrors. And the stakes are… Everything."

"I'm ready."

"I agree." She saw a man – another Aug – approach the café door and enter. He had laughing eyes and a crooked, tricky smile. "Alex, I would like you to meet someone. This is

another associate of mine. I think you two will work well together.”

The man tilted his head in a gesture of greeting. “Well now,” he began, an Irish lilt to his words. “Ms. Vega, is it? The name is Garvin Quinn. A pleasure to meet you.”

She sized him up with a look. Vega knew the kind; a chancer. “So what’s your game?”

“Ah, therein lies a tale,” said Quinn. “Call me a social engineering specialist.”

“Oh,” she gave a nod, confirming her measure of him. “You mean a con-man.”

* * *

Three of the hulking armored cops returned and one of them banged a baton on the bars until Vega stepped back out of reach. With the flash of a beam-key, the cell door opened and the other two took her arms and marched her out. She didn’t resist – not yet. Vega knew she would need to wait for the right moment and exploit it to the fullest when it came. She had little doubt that Ivan was right about the intentions of her captors. Everything was confirmed when they dragged her down a corridor and into the gutted remnants of a medical office, where wreckage had been cleared away in front of a damaged bio-scanner unit.

Further down the corridor, visible through a crumbled section of the wall, Vega caught sight of a handful of other cops gathered in a group, all of them in their patrol armor. Some of them had their helmets off or faceplates retracted, but the moment they saw her looking in their direction they masked up again.

They didn’t want her to see their faces. Even if they had her death planned, they were still taking precautions. If she had Atid-class cyber-optics capable of memory recording or a concealed wet-drive implant, just a glimpse of something could come back and bite them in the ass after the fact,

even if she was a corpse. The police-issue inhibitor cuffs worked best on negating augmented limbs or weapons systems, but their effect on deep-brain implants was less reliable.

The care the crooked policemen were taking was enough that it made Vega certain they had been doing this for a while. One of the cops peeled off from the group and came her way as the two holding her let go. Their helmeted heads bobbed and moved as if they were having a conversation, but Vega heard nothing. Behind the sealed, soundproof visors they were speaking to one another down an encrypted radio link that she wasn't a party to.

Or so they thought. As she stood there waiting for them to make the next move, Vega blink-clicked the optical interface for her infolink and activated a forced reboot for the implant. It was a long shot, but she had no other cards to play.

The magnetic locks on the cells, the evidence of a couple of active consoles here and there in the room with her, all that meant that there was power running to the derelict precinct, and that meant this nasty little conspiracy involved more than just a few greedy beat cops. Vega wasn't getting any kind of signal from outside the building, but the cops were still communicating with one another, which meant that they weren't using a jamming system.

Vega's infolink slowly struggled back to some degree of functionality. It had a whole suite of hidden menus and upgrades that no civilian augmentation should have possessed – a gift of sorts from Janus for agreeing to work with the Juggernaut Collective – and she set it scanning through police band radio channels, trying to isolate the one the people around her were using.

As she did so, the police officer that approached flicked switches on the bio-scanner and it unfurled a sensor frame that resembled an inverted bow. The machine pointed it at her and hummed loudly. Harsh purple light spilled from a sensor grid, and Vega flinched as it passed over her. She

knew an aug-detector when she saw one. The device was feeding a resonance-imaging scan of her implants back to a portable computer atop a shabby office desk.

And then with a whining click, Vega was suddenly hearing the conversation taking place around her, as the infolink tuned in.

“No one is gonna pay a release fee for this one.” She recognized the voice of the angry cop she injured out on the street. “She is nothing special. Little better than that trash out in Golem.”

The reply from the female cop made Vega’s gut fill with ice. “One more for the chop-shop. It’s about time we gave the Dvalis their taste, anyhow. They’re getting impatient for this month’s cut.”

“Screw those meat heads,” said a new voice, male with a nasal pitch. “We’re taking all the risks here! Why do we even need them?” The third figure, of average height and stocky build, came into the conversation. His hands gestured in the air.

“We need them to fence the augmentations,” said the woman, in an exasperated tone that made it clear this subject of conversation was a familiar one. “Unless you want to do it?”

It didn’t come as a surprise to Vega when the Dvali name was mentioned. One of the most notorious organized crime families in Eastern Europe, with a fondness for the Czech Republic and Prague in particular, the Dvali gang had their fingers in most of the illegal transactions that took place in the city. Drugs, prostitution, protection rackets, trafficking in weapons and people… You name it, they had a slice of it. But for the most part, they kept themselves at a distance from the big-picture, global-threat stuff that the Juggernaut Collective generally focused on.

Personally, Vega didn’t care for making that kind of distinction. In her mind, a scumbag was a scumbag, end of story. All that was certain to her in this moment was that

nobody with an augmentation in their body was going to leave this building alive.

Whatever their reasons – if it was through avarice, if it was misplaced hate or just plain and simple loathing for Augs – these cops had made a pact with criminals to prey on Prague's dispossessed and strip their bodies for parts.

"Go call Radich's boys," the female cop was saying. "We need to get these ones out of here by change of shift tonight, or else people back at the central precinct are going to start asking questions about what we're doing when we're off-comms."

The one Vega had injured loomed over her and she heard his voice in her skull through the infolink implant. "I get to deal with her."

"The punk in the hoodie first," insisted the cop by the scanner, and Vega saw him tap his helmet, right where his cheek would be. "Those limbs he has are high-grade. Get them off him intact."

He was talking about Ivan, and Vega knew that their time was almost up. She thought about the desperate infolink message she had transmitted when they had first surrounded her, an emergency panic signal to a Juggernaut Collective digital dead-drop. Had the call made it through? Or had she just vanished off the face of the earth, leaving Janus, Quinn and the others with the mystery of her disappearance?

"Put her back in the cage," began the female cop, and the other one reached out for her.

Vega reacted faster than she could think. She grabbed the sensor frame on the end of its extending arm and yanked it toward her with a quick twist. The mechanism juddered but it turned in her hands and Vega forced it down in a slashing motion. The energized sensor band smashed into the cop's armor, striking his helmet and chest plate in a flash of electricity and breaking plastic. She heard him cry out over the tight-beam link and he recoiled.

Vega exploded into movement, throwing herself over the pile of bricks that was all that was left of the slumped wall and into the corridor. The other cops reacted, turning her way, the pin-lamps mounted on their shoulders snapping on to throw stark white light over the blackened passageway. They blocked the path in front of her, shoulder-to-shoulder in the heavy slabs of their ballistic armor weave, and she sensed the others coming up behind, boots stomping across the floor. Their armor could turn a direct hit at close range from a .45 caliber round or make a knife point skid off, but it also weighed a lot and encumbered the cops just enough to give Vega an edge. Her spare, athletic build beneath her street clothes was nimble in comparison – but she knew that if just one of them could connect with her, she would go down and never rise again.

Legs pumping, Vega sprinted down a corridor that ended in a stairwell. The descending stairs were impassable, choked by bits of fallen-in ceiling, so she went up, hauling herself over the bannisters to cut off corners and gain extra seconds into her lead.

“No guns!” shouted the female cop over the radio. “Shots will carry! Get her before she can get out of the building!”

“Where the hell is that hanzer skank going?” came the reply.

Vega was asking herself the same question. She was already too high off the ground to risk going out a window. Even as she continued to ascend, Vega realized that she had already committed to an instinctual plan, one that could be her last roll of the dice.

Reaching the fifth and highest floor, she skidded across the hallway covered with a thick layer of soot. The walls and ceiling were heat-warped, distorted by the fires that had raged here on the night of the Incident. Her boots crunched on blackened fragments of broken glass and dozens of discarded sabots ejected from spent flechette rounds. In many places, the walls were pock-marked with bullet

impacts and other, less regular deformations, but the deposit of grime made it hard to be certain what had caused them.

She ran on and found the service stairwell leading to the roof. Vega kicked open the door and then she was outside, in the cold and rainy night. She ran to the edge and looked down. The streets below were empty.

“She’s on the roof!” The voice cut through her head and she winced. They would be up here in a minute or less, so she had to use the time well.

Vega dropped to her knees next to the lintel and brought her arm down on the stonework, smashing the ruggedized casing of the inhibitor cuff against the bricks again and again. She pressed her other hand to the spot behind her ear, where the manual cue for her infolink was located. “Janus!” Vega shouted the name out in the direction of the city before her, through the haze of rain. “Track my location! I need extraction, are you reading me?”

Nothing came back to her, and she faltered as a dark possibility occurred. If the risk was too great to the group, would the Juggernaut Collective cut her off? Leave her to die? She wanted to believe that could never happen – but then she remembered faceless, unseen Janus and wondered how hard it would be for a man with no identity to make ghosts of others.

“Stupid cog.” She turned, hearing the angry snarl behind her. Two of the armored figures lumbered toward her, each of them with sparking stun-batons in their hands. “There’s only one way out.”

The other cop, the female, snapped out an order over the radio. “Keep away from the head and the spine. Do not damage the hardware.”

The lights of the city spun around her and Vega went down, pain exploding through her body all over again.

* * *

The streets below flashed past the belly of the VTOL in a blur, projected on to the inside of the virtual cockpit around Vega. She held the flight yoke steady, feathering the engine nacelles at the tips of the aircraft's wings, deftly switching the thruster exhausts from cruise mode to whisper configuration.

"Stay low," said Quinn, leaning forward at her shoulder. "This city has a million eyes and the last thing we want is someone knowing that the Juggernaut Collective is here."

Vega's lip curled and she deliberately took her hands off the controls. The VTOL's nose dipped sharply toward the ground. "Do you want to fly this thing?"

"No!" He gripped the back of her seat.

"Then don't tell me how to do my job." She pulled back on the yoke and the aircraft stabilized again. "I don't tell you how to play head games."

"Point taken," Quinn allowed. "I'm just trying to impress upon you the situation we're in, eh?" He indicated the city beneath. "Detroit isn't friendly territory, Alex, it wasn't even before the Aug Incident. We need to watch ourselves around here."

She didn't respond at first, eyeing her controls. A lot of the districts within sensor range were dark and without power. Many had huge swathes of abandoned buildings, and if she hadn't known better, Vega would have thought a war had been fought in those streets. "I guess they were hit hard around here."

Quinn shrugged. "It's always been a troubled city. Smarter money would have let it die a dozen times over, but there's the rub. Too many people like our man living down there. Not ready to give up and let go."

"I get that…" Vega located their projected landing location and performed a slow loop of the area, looking for somewhere to set down. "And you say you know this guy we're here to recruit?"

“Oh, aye.” Quinn smirked. “Adam Jensen and me, we’re old friends.”

She arched her eyebrow. “Man, the bullshit never stops with you, does it? If I’m going out there with you, I need to know the truth. I read the guy’s file, but level with me… If Jensen sees you, is he going to reach for his iron?”

“I admit he might have some lingering trust issues after what happened between us at Rifleman Bank…”

Vega grimaced at the mention of the floating complex where Belltower had hidden one of its secret prisons. Janus had sent Quinn there to conduct an undercover investigation, and after it was all over – when the United Nations had sent in rescue ships to shut the place down – Vega had been the one to go in and airlift Quinn out of there before Interpol could grab him. What she had seen, even from a distance, had been more than she wanted.

Now Janus had given Vega and Quinn the job of finding this ex-cop in the wilds of Detroit’s lawless districts. The faceless hacker tracked the man to the city, locating the hideout of one of Jensen’s former associates as the most likely place for him to be holed up.

“Jensen is a lot like you,” Quinn went on. “Driven. Committed. Sarcastic.”

“Huh. I like him already.”

Quinn’s tone became serious. “Just play it carefully. He’s vital to the Collective’s ongoing mission. We need to bring him around to working with us. Aligned with Juggernaut, he can be a vital asset, but as a rogue element with no oversight… He’ll cause problems.”

Vega brought the VTOL in for a landing inside the shell of a half-collapsed tenement block, and killed the engines. “What makes you think he’ll come over?”

“Janus has something he wants. Information.”

She released her seat restraints and turned to look at him. “Is that how Janus got you? I’ve always wondered why a professional pretender like Garvin Quinn signed on to work

with a group of renegade hackers. Can't be just for the exotic travel opportunities."

Quinn's face clouded for a moment, and he gave a brittle laugh. "That's an old and boring story, Alex. Janus made me a good offer and I would have been foolish not to accept it. Not much more than that to tell."

"Again, bullshit." She climbed out of the pilot's couch and pushed past him into the back of the VTOL cabin, setting the aircraft's security systems as she went. "You play that attitude with Jensen and he'll walk away. He'll see through you a mile off."

"He might at that," Quinn admitted. "I guess there was more in that file than I thought…"

Vega took her gun from the weapons locker. "You said he's like me? If I was him, that's what I would do."

"I'll bear it in mind."

She paused, mulling over her own words. "I'll tell you something else. If Jensen is used to working on his lonesome, you'll need to give him assurances that joining the Collective isn't going to cramp his style. You'll have to convince him its worth becoming part of a larger effort."

Quinn folded his arms. "How did we convince you?"

The question disarmed her. She hadn't been expecting it, and for a long moment, Vega couldn't find the answer. When Ben Saxon had helped her get away from her old life and opened the door to the Collective, she'd taken it because it was the only option still open to her. But there was more to it than that.

Vega had become part of the Juggernaut Collective out of survival, but she had stayed with them because of something else. The same impulse that made her join Belltower all those years ago, the same thing that had made her help Saxon and risk her life for strangers. The need to be part of something bigger than myself, the hope to do some good in the world.

“Janus promised me that together we could make a difference,” she said, at length. “Alone, there’s only so far you can go.”

Quinn’s breezy grin returned, and he opened the VTOL’s hatch. “A heart-warming sentiment, to be sure. Let’s go see if our boy Adam agrees.”

* * *

Time blurred, and then she was back in the now.

Her body as limp as a bundle of rags, the crooked cops dragged Vega between them into the corridor between the cells and dumped her on the damp concrete floor. One of them nudged her in the ribs with the tip of his boot, looking for signs of life.

At the bars across the passage, Ivan was reaching through the gaps and swatting fruitlessly at the two armored figures, both of them beyond the reach of his steel fingers. “You bastards! What did you do to her?” He shouted at them, rattling the cage door. “We’re not your victims! When I get out of here, I’ll kill you!”

“Is that so, cog?” The other cop drew his stun baton and the glowing blue tines at the blunt end fizzed into life. “You think you’re something special, don’t you?” He cracked the baton over the bars and Ivan reflexively shrank back. “You’re nothing. Take away your toys and you’re just a leftover cut of meat!” The cop’s voice rose to an angry snarl. “I’m sick of you!”

At the empty cell across the way, a beam-key in the palm of the other policeman’s armor flashed at the lock mechanism and it snapped open, the door to Vega’s cell rolling back. “What are you doing?” said the other cop. “Leave that one. Help me with the woman first!”

He reached down to grab her arm and haul her up again; it was the moment she had been waiting for.

Shaky, sickened, her vision blurry, Vega still committed to the action and jerked into motion. She came around in a blind strike that planted the length of her forearm in the cop's throat. He had flexible anti-stab panels protecting his neck, but Vega put every ounce of effort she could muster into the blow and she hit hard enough to make him choke.

The cop standing in front of Ivan's cell twisted toward her, but the man saw the opportunity and his cyberarms extended out through the bars, bending back on themselves in a way that would have been impossible for flesh and bone. He caught the cop around the shoulders and slammed him back into the bars, holding him in place. The baton fell to the floor and they struggled. If Ivan hadn't been hobbled by an inhibitor, he would have been able to keep up the pressure until the cop's arms broke, but as it was he had just enough strength to hold on to him.

While that was happening, Vega clawed wildly at the controls on the side of her captor's helmet and triggered the release switch. Planes of dense plastic slid back to reveal the swarthy, sweating face of a middle-aged man. The cop looked afraid behind his mask. She punched him hard enough to break his nose and blood gushed out of his nostrils in a red fan. He gave a low moan and staggered back.

"Kurva!" The cop pressed one gloved hand to his face, grabbing at the stunner on his belt.

Had she been in better shape, Vega would have gone for the smarter attack, but she was hurting and she was angry, and in that moment she just wanted to hit back. Pushing off the bars of the cell, she threw a flying kick into the cop's torso and his balance left him. He went down in a heap, and she grabbed the fallen stun baton.

He tried to claw his way back up, but Vega put the tip of the baton right into the gap between his chest plate and the under-sheath, hitting him with a full charge. The cop jerked and then was still.

Vega turned around and stalked toward the second policeman, still struggling to get free of Ivan's grip. He shouted for help, but she cut that off quickly by unloading the rest of the stun baton's battery into him.

Ivan shoved the unconscious body away and grasped at the air. "The others will be coming!"

"Yeah," Vega said wearily. She found the beam-key and used it to disarm her inhibitor, then tossed it through the bars to Ivan. Her augs ran through a reboot cycle and she felt the rush of her Sentinel medical implant triggering as it immediately set to work on healing the injuries she'd collected over the last few hours. As Ivan extracted himself from his cell and tore off his own inhibitor, Vega watched the flicker of status dots on the corner of her vision come alive as her augmentations returned to full capacity. As ironic as it was, she felt human again.

Ivan grabbed at her arm. "We've got to run, now!"

She resisted. "What about them?" Vega jerked her thumb at the handful of other unfortunates in the rest of the cells. "They're in the shit the same as us!"

"We can't save everyone!" he retorted.

She snatched the beam-key from his hand. "We're damn well gonna try." Moving quickly down the line of the sealed cells, she opened them all and shouted for the people inside to move.

Ivan was already at the stairwell as Vega herded the other captives out of the cell block. There were five of them – three men, two more women – and they all had the twitchy, gaunt aspect of someone too far past their last dose of neuropozyne. They looked to Vega for leadership and she beckoned them after her.

Above, a door crashed open and heavy boots thundered down the stairs. "Here they come!" shouted Ivan. He had looted the service pistols belonging to the two unconscious cops, one revolver in each hand. Before Vega could stop him, he was firing blindly up the stairwell.

“Go!” she cried, and shoved him.

Ivan pulled his hood down over his head and set the pace down the stairs, until they emerged on the lower level of the derelict station house – a grey concrete parking garage supported by blocky pillars. A few gutted patrol cruisers had been abandoned here and there, and the ragged group of escapees threaded between them as they made for the street. At the far end of the garage, a ramp led up and out to ground level.

If we can get outside, Vega was thinking, we can scatter. She knew it was likely that they wouldn’t all make it, but a few would. All it took was someone to raise the alarm and shine a light on what was happening down here. Just one of them.

They were halfway across when a group of cops marched down the ramp, all of them toting heavy Widowmaker auto-shotguns. Vega saw the shimmer of metal behind them as a roller-gate slid across to seal off the escape route.

“No survivors,” said the woman whose voice she had come to hate. The shotguns roared in a salvo of hard sound and one of the other Augs went down, her body struck by frangible flechettes that ripped open flesh.

Vega dove for cover behind a charging station and she saw Ivan fire back at the corrupt police officers, but he was missing every other shot. Heavy anti-material loads were fired back at them, smashing out chunks of concrete from the support pillars. Vega cried out in anger.

This was not how Alejandra Vega wanted to go out, gunned down by a gang of crooked opportunist cops in a dingy, blackened basement. This wouldn’t mean anything. It wouldn’t make any difference.

“Alex.” The words in her ear came from nowhere, soft and fluid. “Do you hear me?”

“Janus?”

“Very close now,” said the digitally-neutral voice. “I’m sorry it took so long to find you. Scanning in this area is—”

“Apologize later!” she snapped. “I need back-up!”

“And you’ll have it,” promised the hacker. “I just need you to get that gate open. It’s off the grid, I can’t access it.”

There were three heavily-armed shooters between her and the gate control box on the far wall. Without a weapon, there was no way she could have fought her way through them. But Vega had other abilities she could use.

“On my way,” she said, blink-clicking an option in her vision field. She didn’t have much power in her bio-cells, but it would have to be enough.

Vega sucked in a deep breath and felt a familiar-but-unsettling sensation wash over her body. She looked down at her hand as a golden glow turned her into glass.

The optical distortion field generated by her cloaking augmentation was the most energy-thirsty tech she had, and it had been too long since Vega had been able to get a recharge. In static mode, the cloak would last a little longer, but now she was using it in the worst possible way, on the run.

An observer looking her way would have seen a shimmering haze passing through the cordite-choked air of the parking garage, a shape like rain over a window.

Adrenaline flooded her veins and the nerve-jack that boosted her reflex speed kicked into action. The bio-cell charge was already flashing critical red and Vega was only halfway across the hundred meter distance to the gate. One of the cops saw movement and pivoted in her direction. She glimpsed the black maw of the Widowmaker’s muzzle rising, heard the heavy snap-clack of a round entering the chamber.

The cloak field died as she reached the foot of the ramp and suddenly everyone could see her. Vega felt naked, totally exposed with zero cover.

“Get her!” shouted the cop.

She threw herself at the control panel as gunshots erupted, turning the air around her into fire and smoke. Vega

smashed the door switch with the heel of her hand and collapsed against the floor. The gate clanked and ground open, but the sound of the mechanism was drowned out by the low, rattling buzz of multiple rotor-blades.

Vega fell back against the wall as a fan of laser light washed over her from outside. More beams shone out and probed the dimness of the basement. Six police-issue quad-rotor drones floated on the lip of the ramp like a flock of raptors balancing on an updraft. They moved in unison, folding into an attack formation.

Vega's breath caught in her throat. The cops had called in their own help. The machines would take down everyone and nothing she could do would stop it.

But then, Janus always did like to make an entrance. "Stay down, Alex." The voice seemed to come from the drone hovering in front of her. "This will just take a moment."

The machines dove into the echoing garage and split apart, each one turning to draw a bead not on the escapees but on the corrupt cops. Armor piercing non-lethal taser darts jetted from ejector barrels mounted beneath their central pods, every one of the drones firing simultaneously. The armed police officers shouted in pain, screamed, fell twitching to the ground. Then as quickly as they had arrived, the drones pivoted and slipped into a well-ordered line, flying back the way they had come and away into the rainy night.

"What… Just…?" One of the Aug captives stumbled out from behind cover. "How did that…?" He didn't seem able to grasp the fact that he was still alive.

"Get out of here, now!" Vega snapped. "Run and don't look back!"

"Alex, I am inside the mainframe. The central police monitoring system has been alerted." Janus reported the event dispassionately. "Weapons fire reported at your location. Ground units have been dispatched. ETA is three minutes."

“Copy that,” she panted, fighting to catch her breath as the other prisoners raced past her to freedom.

Down in the parking garage, she saw Ivan striding toward the body of the female cop. He tossed away the spent revolvers and stooped to gather up the shotgun lying next to the semi-conscious woman. As she started toward him, Ivan put a foot on the cop’s chest plate and racked the Widowmaker’s slide.

He took careful aim at the police officer’s head. “You hide your faces,” he spat. “Because you’re the monsters, not us!”

“Ivan, don’t!” Vega reached out to him, but he tightened his finger on the trigger. “You do that and you’re a murderer.”

“Do you know how I spent the Incident?” he said, in a wavering voice. “Locked myself in the cellar… Smashed it to pieces down there. Because all I could see were demons all around me. I thought I’d lost my mind. My wife, Melissa… I was terrified I would attack her.” Ivan glared at Vega. “I never hurt anyone. But they won’t hear that. They want me to be a killer.” He jabbed the cop with the gun. “Don’t you?” he shouted.

“Shooting her won’t solve anything.” Vega took a step closer, gauging the distance. With her bio-cells depleted, she knew there was no way she could grab the shotgun before Ivan fired.

“I want to make them pay,” he growled.

“They will,” she insisted. “You kill this…criminal… and what happens? More hate directed against people like us. But there’s a different way. I have…a friend. He’s hacking into the bodycams these scum are wearing, right now.” She pointed at the camera pod built into the cop’s armor. “All the incriminating video they’ve think they’ve been deleting? We can recover it. And by tomorrow morning, when the Juggernaut Collective wide-bands it across the net, everyone in Prague is going to know what these corrupt bastards have been doing here.”

The gun muzzle drooped. “I don’t understand… You were taken, just like I was…”

“I used myself as bait,” Vega corrected. “The people I work with… We’d heard about Augs going missing in the city. I decided to do something about it.”

Ivan was silent for a long moment. Then he angrily tossed the shotgun away into the shadows and turned on Vega. “You think that’s going to be enough? You think exposing these cowards will erase all the hate and prejudice against us?”

“It’s a start,” she said, hushed by the force of the man’s fury.

“You’re wrong.” Ivan pushed past her and stalked away. She trailed after him, and they both heard the whine of approaching police sirens. He pointed back at the derelict building. “They’ll blame this on us. They made this a war. And we’re going to fight it.”

“We?” She seized on the word. “You mean ARC?”

Ivan pulled his yellow hood close around his head, his face vanishing into shadow. “If you’re not ready to get your hands bloody, you should stay out of our way.” He broke into a sprint, his recurved silver legs flashing against the wet asphalt as he shot away.

“You can’t save everyone,” said Janus.

“He told me the same thing.” Vega dashed into a side alley and put distance between herself and the old police station as the patrol units screeched to a halt outside. She melted into the downpour, letting the city swallow her up.

* * *

Dawn was pushing through the grey clouds by the time Vega was at the rendezvous point. The abandoned Nixx clothing store was an echoing, empty space filled with glassy, pearlescent video walls that flickered with forgotten digital chaff.

She worked quietly at a medkit, catching a glimpse of herself in one dull mirror-screen. Despite her ordeal in the cells, Vega looked oddly normal in the face of it all. She felt somehow artificial, as if that image of her belonged to another, fictional version of Alex Vega.

And in a way, it did. Who she was now was not the same woman who had enrolled in Belltower's air corps, not the same woman who had thrown caution to the wind to help a good man in a bad situation a lifetime ago back in Panama City.

"Who am I now?" She asked the question aloud as she bandaged her wounds.

"You are who we need you to be." Janus's words issued out of the air, projected from some unseen source in the room.

Vega turned toward the sound. "You're watching me?"

"As much as I can," said the synthetic voice. "I watch everyone. It's the only way I can keep you safe." There was a pause. "When you went off the grid, I was concerned. You're a valuable part of the Collective, Alex. We can't afford to lose you."

"Is that why you didn't want me to investigate the disappearances?" She folded her arms and glared into the gloom.

"I didn't believe the risk was worth the reward. Please don't think I am being callous, but a few lost souls who fall through the cracks can't be measured against the scale of our work. We are opposing a global threat. The Illuminati wouldn't dirty their hands with something like those corrupt police officers and their harvester ring." He paused again. "We have to pick our targets carefully, for maximum impact —"

"I picked this one," Vega retorted. "You need to be careful, Janus. You've been fighting the Illuminati for long enough that you're starting to think like them. Remember what is important."

When the virtual voice returned, she thought she heard regret in it. “Yes. You’re right. Sometimes it is hard to see… Where the line is drawn.”

She sighed. “So how much data did you get from the cops?”

“Enough to bury everyone involved,” Janus noted. “It was remarkably easy to reconstruct the fragmentary data from the memory banks of those bodycams. I have sent it to a dozen news networks, Interpol and every department of the Prague police force. A small victory… But as you have reminded me, perhaps an important one.”

Vega rested her head against the glass wall. “We made a difference,” she said quietly. Then louder, she asked “What’s next?”

“You’re exhausted,” Janus noted. “You need to rest. Go back to the safe house. We’ll reschedule this meeting. It can wait.”

“No,” Vega shook off her fatigue. “They don’t rest. We can’t either. Where’s my next rendezvous?”

“Right here,” said a hard-edged voice from the entranceway. “Vega? Been a while since Detroit.”

She stepped out and a slow smile emerged on her lips.

A tall man in a dark, ankle-length coat stood waiting for her, his eyes hidden behind black-gold shades.

“Adam Jensen,” Vega replied. “It’s good to see you. We’ve got a lot of work to do.”

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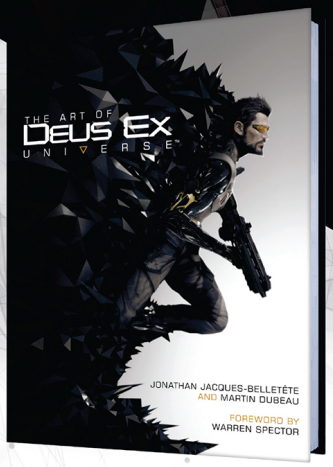

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